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 FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
 TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4936
 INFO RUEHKKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 6232
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 C O N F I D E N T I A L ADDIS ABABA 0546

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
 TAGS: SREF, ET, SHUM
 SUBJECT: FALASHAS

1. (C-ENTIRE TEXT)

2. TWO US CITIZENS REPRESENTING THE UNION OF AMERICAN HEBREW CONGREGATIONS WERE IN ETHIOPIA FROM JANUARY 23 TO FEBRUARY 2, OF WHICH TIME THEY SPENT ONE WEEK IN GONDAR REGION VISITING FALASHA VILLAGES. THE TWO CAME AS TOURISTS BUT BROUGHT IN WITH THEM SEVEN SUITCASES FILLED WITH RELIGIOUS ARTIFACTS AND ITEMS OF CLOTHING FOR DISTRIBUTION TO FALASHAS. BEFORE COMING TO ETHIOPIA THEY MADE CLEAR TO ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES AND ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL TOURISM COMMISSION OFFICES IN THE US THAT THEIR AIM WAS TO VISIT FALASHA VILLAGES. THEY WERE GIVEN A PERMIT TO SPEND SEVEN DAYS IN GONDAR REGION AND TO TRAVEL BY CAR AND ON FOOT TO FALASHA VILLAGES, ACCOMPANIED AT ALL TIMES OF COURSE BY AN NTO GUIDE.

3. THEY WERE ABLE TO VISIT SEVEN VILLAGES ALTOGETHER, TWO OF WHICH WERE OUTSIDE THE AREA OF THEIR PERMIT. SIX OF THE SEVEN WERE IN THE SOUTHERN PART OF GONDAR REGION, WITHIN A RADIUS OF THIRTY MILES FROM GONDAR CITY. THE SEVENTH WAS A VILLAGE AT THE FOOTHILLS OF THE SIMIEN MOUNTAINS, WHICH THEY WERE ABLE TO REACH BY JOINING A TOUR OF BRITISH BIRDWATCHERS. THEY FOUND EXTREME POVERTY AND MISERY THERE, WITH FOOD IN VERY SHORT SUPPLY AND EVEN THE MOST ELEMENTARY MEDICAL CARE LACKING. THE OTHER SIX VILLAGES WERE QUITE POOR BY WESTERN STANDARDS BUT APPEARED TO HAVE SUFFICIENT FOOD AND ACCESS TO SOME MEDICAL CARE AND TO EDUCATION. AS FAR AS THEY COULD TELL, JUDAISM WAS FREELY PRACTICED IN ALL THE VILLAGES THEY VISITED, AND THEY FOUND NO EVIDENCE OF OFFICIAL INTERFERENCE WITH OR HARRASSMENT OF FALASHAS ON RELIGIOUS OR ETHNIC GROUNDS. THEY DID FIND THAT THE FORMAL TEACHING OF HEBREW IS NOT ALLOWED, NOT EVEN IN THE LARGE VILLAGE OF AMBOBER. (DURING ITS VISIT TO AMBOBER LAST AUGUST CODEL WOLPE WAS TOLD THAT THE TEACHING OF HEBREW WOULD BE RESUMED SOON IN AMBOBER.) GENERALLY, THEY SAY, FALASHAS DID NOT SEEM WORSE OFF THAN THEIR CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS.

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4. THEY DID FIND, HOWEVER, A UNIVERSAL URGE ON THE PART OF ABLE-BODIED TEENAGE AND ADULT FALASHAS TO LEAVE ETHIOPIA AND SOMETHING APPROACHING A MASS EXODUS BY THIS PARTICULAR SEGMENT OF THE FALASHA POPULATION. THEY FOUND SOME OF THE FEW WITH HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATIONS ABLE TO LEAVE LEGALLY ON ISRAELI GOVERNMENT SCHOLARSHIPS, BUT A MUCH LARGER NUMBER SIMPLY PICKS UP AND WALKS OFF TO SUDAN, OFTEN TAKING WITH THEM THEIR DOMESTIC ANIMALS. DEPARTURES ARE SO EXTENSIVE THAT VILLAGES ARE ALREADY DEPLETED OF ABLE-BODIES POPULATION AND RISK HAVING NO ONE BUT THE VERY YOUNG AND VERY OLD LEFT. THE US CITIZEN VISITORS SAY THEY WERE TOLD THAT PENALTIES FOR ATTEMPTED ILLEGAL EMIGRATION ARE LENIENT; IF CAUGHT, THOSE SEEKING TO ESCAPE TO SUDAN WOULD BE JAILED FOR THREE OR FOUR DAYS AND LET GO. (THIS IS IN CONTRAST TO OTHER REPORTS THAT ALLEGE LENGTHY JAILING, TORTURE AND EVEN OCCASIONALLY KILLING OF FALASHAS CAUGHT TRYING TO ESCAPE OR OF THEIR RELATIVES LEFT BEHIND.)

5. WE DRAW THE DEPARTMENT'S PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THIS REPORT BECAUSE IT IS THE RESULT OF THE MOST EXTENSIVE TRAVELLING TO FALASHA VILLAGES LEGALLY UNDERTAKEN THAT WE KNOW OF OVER THE PAST TWO OR THREE YEARS. ONLY THREE OF THE SEVEN VILLAGES WERE ACCESSIBLE BY ROAD; THE OTHER FOUR HAD TO BE REACHED BY MORE OR LESS LONG HIKES OVER DIFFICULT TERRAIN. THE RESULTANT PICTURE (THE VISITORS MET WITH CHARGE' AND A/DCM BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER THEIR TIME IN GONDAR REGION) IS GENERALLY CONSISTENT WITH REPORTS GIVEN BY OTHER FOREIGN TRAVELLERS TO FALASHA VILLAGES BUT MORE DETAILED AND ON THE WHOLE CONVEYS A SOMEWHAT MORE FAVORABLE VIEW OF CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH FALASHAS LIVE IN ETHIOPIA.

KORN

END OF MESSAGE

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